

Native American veterans' issues

Senator Daniel K. Akaka Papers

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STATEMENT OF
SENATOR DANIEL K. AKAKA
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS ISSUES
MAY 21, 1997

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to be here, and would like to join you and Senator Inouye in welcoming Secretary Brown, Mr. Borrego, Mr. Hensley, Dr. Batres, and Mr. Pedigo. I would also like to extend my warmest aloha to Kali Watson, chairman of the Hawaiian Homes Commission. Traveling from Hawaii to Washington, D.C. is long and exhausting, I appreciate Kali taking the time to be here today. Let me also welcome the representatives from the Native American tribes who will be testifying.

It has been over eight years since this Committee has held a hearing on Federal programs and policies related to Native American veterans. Since that time, we have made great strides in addressing the needs of Native American veterans. However, there are still more work that needs to be done.

In 1992, I introduced legislation which established the Native American Veteran Housing Loan Program. This five-year pilot program provides direct home loans from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to Native American veterans residing on trust lands. Previously, Native American veterans living on trust lands were unable to obtain home loans from private lenders. Since Congress initiated this program, 127 Native American veterans have been able to achieve homeownership. Unfortunately, the program will cease on September 30, 1997, if it is not reauthorized. Although the VA has proposed a two-year extension, I have introduced a bill, S. 714, which provides for permanent authorization of the Native American Veteran Housing Loan program.

A two-year extension fails to recognize the fundamental reason why this program was exists. Native American veterans who reside on trust lands should be afforded the same benefits available to other veterans. This is the only program that allows Native American veterans to obtain home loans. I urge VA to reconsider their proposal and support a

permanent reauthorization of the program.

Mr. Chairman, as the author of legislation creating the Center for Minority Veterans and its Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans, I remain committed to ensuring minority veterans, including Native American veterans, are afforded equal access to VA services and benefits.

The Advisory Committee and the Center have been proactive in their efforts to reach out to all minority veterans. The Committee is racially diverse and includes Native American Indians and Native Hawaiians. Members of the Advisory Subcommittee on Health recently visited Hawaii and spoke with a number of veterans to hear their concerns and thoughts on how VA can improve access to minority veterans. People has a preconception that those of us who live in "paradise" must not have problems. On the contrary, Hawaii has it fair share of unique problems that need to be addressed. Our distance from the continental United States often places our residents at a disadvantage in obtaining access to available resources. I understand that the Advisory Committee has also visited several Native American tribes across the country.

Mr. Chairman, as you may know, I was successful in extending the authority for the Advisory Committee until 1999. I hope that my colleagues on this Committee will support my efforts to preserve the Advisory Committee when the time comes.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I want to recognize the accomplishments of the Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS). I have been a staunch supporter of the Vet Centers and sought reauthorization of RCS last year. The Vet Centers have provided non-traditional counseling to veterans within their individual communities. They have been very successful providing an alternative setting for veterans seeking assistance from the VA. We are very fortunate to have Dr. Batres as the Director of RCS. He has been very proactive in reaching out to Native American veterans. The first Vet Center was established under his leadership on Hopi lands. Another Vet Center was recently organized for the Yakima tribe, and a new Vet Center will be established to assist the Navajos this year.

Mr. Chairman, I urge my colleagues to support my efforts to permanently authorize the Native American Veteran Housing Loan Program. I look forward to working with members of this Committee to ensure that Native American Indians, Native Hawaiians and Alaskan Natives are treated fairly and provided equal access to VA benefits and service enjoyed by other American veterans.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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